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A Descriptive Study: Factors Affecting the Pronunciation of English Language (L2)

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Abstract

Acquiring correct second language pronunciation is an indispensable part of the language learning process. It plays a substantial role in enhancing the communicative competence and performance of second language learners. The learning of pronunciation is a very sensitive and complicated aspect of the English language classroom. However, all English language learners are not equally good in learning pronunciation. The aim of this research is to explore the factors which affect the pronunciation of English language learners. Theories, empirical evidence, and personal observations are discussed in this study which classifies the factors affecting pronunciation into two types, that is, inner and outer factors. Inner factors include age, brain, aptitude, types of learners and goals. Outer factors include first language interference, motivation, types of teachers and teaching methodologies, classroom environment, and institutional variables. This research is significant because it highlights the importance of acquiring pronunciation of the second language. Moreover, it provides an insight to language teachers and learners which allows them to critically understand the factors which affect the pronunciation of English as a second language as well as to reflect on their own learning and teaching methodologies. This research is qualitative and descriptive in nature. To support the arguments presented in this research, the researcher sought help from primary source books, personal observations and empirical studies, as well as secondary source research articles, journals and reviews. In conclusion, this study also gives some suggestions to teach pronunciation in the English language classroom.

Keywords: English language, factors, pronunciation, second language learning, second language teaching

Introduction

Pronunciation is a fundamental part of the language learning process. It takes a lot of attention to acquire the pronunciation of a language, which not only involves uttering the correct sounds but also involves putting them together in the right combination during the flow of speech. Knowing a lot of vocabulary items is meaningless unless one can pronounce them accurately. The world has now become

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a global village where people are learning different languages for communication. This phenomenon has heightened the significance of pronunciation not only in the language learning process but also in communication. Consequently, second language pronunciation has become an area of immense interest for researchers in the field of applied linguistics.

When it comes to learning a language besides one's native language, the first and foremost choice of the learners around the world is the English language. English has been the dominant language across the world for more than a century. There has been a lot of discussion on educational, economic, political, social and linguistic forums about English as the most influential language around the globe. Therefore, English language is known as a global language. It has been widely observed that one of the main goals of learners and teachers while learning and teaching the English language is to acquire native-like proficiency. When conversing with others in English, the first thing that is noticed is the pronunciation of the target language, which creates a positive impression about the competence of the speaker.

1.1. Significance of the Research

This research is significant because it not only highlights the importance of pronunciation in second language learning but also provides the profound insight needed to understand the learning and teaching of the pronunciation of English as a second language. Moreover, this research brings to light all the factors which constitute barriers in the way to acquire better pronunciation.

1.2. Research Gap

A lot of research work has been carried out regarding the importance of pronunciation in language learning and teaching. Similarly, some studies have also been conducted which have investigated specific factors affecting pronunciation during second language learning. This research bridges the gap and provides a detailed insight into both internal and external factors which cause hindrance in acquiring the correct pronunciation of English learned as a second language.

1.3. Research Objectives

This research has the following objectives.

- 1) To find out the internal factors affecting the learning and teaching of the pronunciation of English as second language.
- 2) To find out the external factors affecting the learning and teaching of the pronunciation of English as second language.

- 3) To find out the reasons behind ESL learners' passiveness in acquiring the pronunciation of English as second language.

1.4. Research Questions

The current research answers the following questions.

- 1) What are the internal factors affecting the learning and teaching of English language pronunciation?
- 2) What are the external factors affecting the learning and teaching of English language pronunciation?
- 3) Why ESL learners are passive in learning the pronunciation of English language?

1.5. Delimitation

To begin with, this research is restricted only to the study of the factors which affect the pronunciation of English language (L2) in learning and teaching due to time constraints. Furthermore, this research is limited to the Pakistan and only a selected number of books and articles were studied during this research.

2. Literature Review

Gaining accuracy in pronunciation is an area of great interest and concern in the study of second language acquisition and it is also an area of great debate and discussion among researchers. According to Morely, bad and incomprehensible pronunciation makes communication unpleasant and creates confusion for both speakers and listeners (Morely, [1998](#)). Furthermore, it is obvious that poor pronunciation makes learners lose their self-assurance and it also has a negative influence on their credibility and abilities. Since mid-1990s, tremendous growth in research about L2 pronunciation has gleaned a renewed focus on intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability (Kang & Ginther, [2018](#), p. 2).

- Intelligibility (the speaker produces sound patterns that are recognizable as English)
- Comprehensibility (the listener is able to understand the meaning of what is said)
- Interpretability (the listener is able to understand the purpose of what is said)

In fact, in recent discussions about English language teaching the unrealistic idea that learners should sound and speak like native speakers has been disappearing rapidly. According to Burns, a learner must achieve intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability (Burns, [2003](#)). Learners who want to learn English as a second language strive to speak English accurately and fluently.

However, they face a lot of problems in pronunciation which slows down the learning process because they are unable to acquire intelligibility in their pronunciation.

2.1. Intelligibility

The inevitability of the notion of intelligibility in the area of pronunciation is uncontroversial. Second language teachers and learners consider it as essential to develop intelligible speech patterns (Munaro, [2010](#)). The notion of intelligibility is not new in second language learning and teaching. It goes back to early 1900s, when Sweet stated it as a guiding principle in teaching pronunciation in his book “Practical Language Teaching” published in 1900. He further added that it is a foundational attribute in L2 learning (Sweet, [1900](#)). Abercrombie articulated in his first published article that second language learners should aim for clear pronunciation rather than a native-like accent (Abercrombie, [1949](#)). Gimson talked about intelligibility while emphasizing that second language learners do not need to sound like native speakers.

For instance, if a speaker says howz u? rather than how are you?, then there is no intelligibility because of inaccurate sound, stress and intonation pattern. This shows that intelligibility can be developed by focusing on the sound system, stress and intonation pattern of the English language (Gimson, [1962](#)). Clear pronunciation is essential in spoken communication. Even when learners produce minor inaccuracies in vocabulary and grammar, they are more likely to communicate effectively when they have good pronunciation and intonation (Burns, [2003](#)).

2.2. Features of English Pronunciation

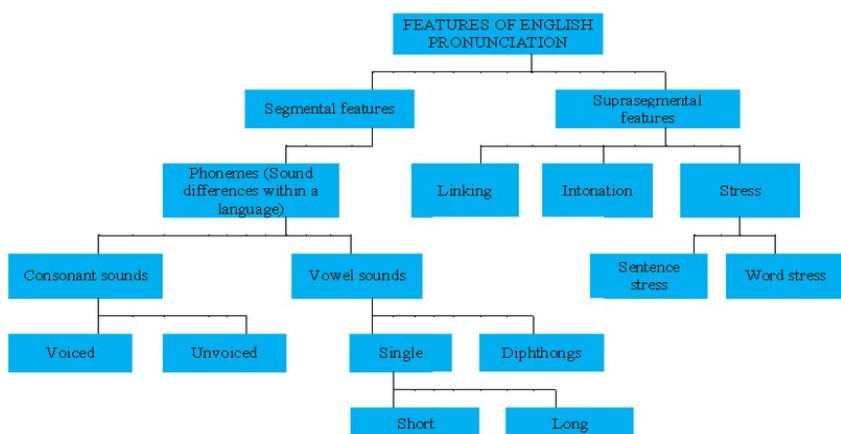


Figure 1. Various features of English language pronunciation

2.3. Segmental Features

It relates to sounds at the micro level. Some studies focused on studying segmental phonology as compared to supra-segmental features. This is due to the fact that segmental features are relatively easier to explain and learn in contrast to supra-segmental features, since they involve the study of the individual vowels and consonants (Coniam, [2002](#)).

2.4. Supra-segmental Features

It relates to sounds at the macro level. Some studies emphasized that accurate pronunciation can be achieved by improving supra-segmental production in contrast to segmental features (Jenkins, [2002](#)).

2.5. Linking of Sounds

It refers to the way the final sound of a word is joined to the initial sound of the next word. To produce connected speech, speakers run words together and link consonants to vowels, consonants to consonants, and vowels to vowels. They also reduce some sounds and leave others out altogether.

2.6. Intonation

Intonation is the melody of the English language. It denotes the rise and fall in the pitch of the speakers according to the context and meaning of the ongoing communication (Rough, [1998](#)).

2.7. Stress

Prominence given to one syllable over others during the utterance of a word is known as stress (Rough, [1998](#)).

2.8. Factors Affecting the Pronunciation of English Language (L2)

In the course of time, different studies were conducted on pronunciation which epitomized that there are a number of factors which affect the pronunciation of English as a second language (L2). Kenworthy conducted a study and concluded that age, exposure, innate phonetic ability, identity, language ego, motivation and interest of the learner are the factors affecting pronunciation during second language acquisition (Kenworthy, [1987](#)). Moreover, Eliot described that learner's attitude towards pronunciation is known as Pronunciation Attitude Inventory (PAI) and it is the main variable in relation to the acquisition of pronunciation of English as a second language (L2) (Eliot, [1995](#)). On the whole, it is difficult to provide a complete list of factors affecting pronunciation during second language acquisition.

Therefore, linguists have divided these factors into two main types, that is, internal and external factors.

- 1) Internal factors
- 2) External factors

2.9. Internal Factors

2.9.1. Age. It is a frequently occurring observation of teachers in ESL classroom that young learners are more likely to acquire the correct pronunciation of English. They face less difficulty in understanding novel sounds and in uttering them, whereas older learners face more trouble in fixing their pronunciation. This relationship of language acquisition with the variable ‘age’ is known as the Critical Period Hypothesis. CPH has been the subject of endless debate in linguistics and language acquisition. It was first proposed by Lenneberg ([1967](#)). According to CPH, if a learner does not learn a language in a certain age, he may not be able to acquire a better pronunciation of that language after that age. Usually, if the learner starts to speak the second language before the age of six, he will have only a little or no accent. However, if the learner starts to speak the second language between the age of seven and eleven years, he probably will have a slight accent. If the learner starts to speak the second language after the age of twelve, he will definitely have an accent (Nation & Newton, [2009](#), p.78). The learner’s abilities, competencies and cognitive skills vary according to his age. As Harmer said, “It has something to do with plasticity of the brain” (Harmer, [2001](#), p. 37).

Therefore, it is concluded that age affects the pronunciation of English greatly. On the other hand, some researchers like Marinova, Marshall and Snow as well as Johnson and Newport suggested that the learners of a second language go through different developmental stages and their learning depends on their cognitive maturity and neurological factors (Bista, [2009](#), p.13). As a matter of fact, CPH was first presented as an answer to all the questions but some researchers still believe that it is not the only factor which affects the acquisition of English as a second language (L2). Indeed, there are other factors as well.

2.9.2. Brain. As mentioned above, a child seems to have less difficulty in acquiring native-like pronunciation in contrast to an adult learner because a child’s brain is plastic in contrast to an adult’s brain (Harmer, [2001](#), p.37). After the age of nine years, a child’s brain matures and functions are assigned to left and right hemispheres and it becomes difficult for the child to acquire native-like pronunciation. Some researchers and neurologists assert that there is a strong connection between language learning and lateralization. Lenneberg suggested that

lateralization is a slow process, it starts at the age of two and it ends during puberty. In an early age, the brain is not sufficiently developed. However, after puberty the brain is sufficiently developed to lose its plasticity and it causes the lateralization of the language function (Lenneberg, [1967](#)). Therefore, it is hard for an older learner to acquire native-like pronunciation in a second language. However, some researchers have the opposite opinion and they assert that plasticity survives puberty and the brain retains its plasticity in the twenties; hence, the learners still have the ability to acquire native-like pronunciation (Lund, [2003](#)). It suggests that human brain has the tendency to change and develop over time.

2.9.3. Aptitude. It has been observed in ESL classroom that some students seemingly make good progress in acquiring pronunciation as compared to others. Researchers and language teachers studied them closely and they revealed that such students possessed a specific set of characteristics which enabled them to acquire good pronunciation of the English language. It was labeled as aptitude (Zhang, [2009](#)). Aptitude is defined as “a disposition to be able to do something well” (McDonough, [1981](#), p.17). It means that every individual has an ability which helps him to perform any task, such as acquiring appropriate pronunciation of the second language. This innate ability is known as aptitude (Harmer, [2001](#), p. 41).

Researches and studies showed that learners with a more positive aptitude towards English language learning are able to acquire the pronunciation of English speedily and they improve a lot. It is amazing to see the magic of the right aptitude in ESL classroom. Carroll ([1962](#)) and Carroll ([1981](#)) highlighted four traits that form language aptitude.

- i. Phonemic coding ability: the capability to discriminate and code foreign sounds such that they can be recalled.
- ii. Grammatical sensitivity: the capability to analyze language and to figure out its rules.
- iii. Inductive language learning ability: the capability to improve language skills through exposure.
- iv. Memory: the amount of rote learning activity needed to internalize something (such as a new sound, a lexical item, a grammatical rule, pronunciation or spelling of a word)

All in all, aptitude is important for language learning and it facilitates the learning process rather than hindering it.

2.10. Types of Learners

Every learner belongs to a different background and has a unique personality

and nature. Learners have some responsibilities in ESL classroom. Indeed, their different personalities determine how earnest they are towards fulfilling their responsibilities and how seriously they are taking the language learning process. These differences in personality visibly affect the acquisition of English as a second language (L2). Learners are divided into two types according to their personalities

- I. Extrovert learners
- II. Introvert learners

2.10.1. Extrovert learners. It is a generic statement that an extrovert learner tends to have an accurate pronunciation of the target language because an extrovert learner understands his responsibilities best. Moreover, he is social, courageous, talkative, likes to make friends and join groups, tends to express himself and takes part in every activity enthusiastically. Therefore, he has more opportunities to improve his pronunciation of the target language (L2). Extrovert leaner is not afraid of making mistakes, being laughed at and made fun of, being ridiculed and of losing face. When he speaks the target language, he feels confident about it. “*Extrovert students may be silenced and may lose their enthusiasm if taught by irritated teachers. Hence teachers should be aware of this fact*” (Hedges, [2000](#), p. 20).

2.10.2. Introvert learners. An introvert learner is exactly the opposite of the extrovert learner. This kind of learner is typically shy, quiet, likes to stay alone, and introspective. This kind of learner tends to avoid risky conversations and likes writing more. Furthermore, an introvert learner is more into reading books than talking. An introvert learner feels uncomfortable in his own skin and he is afraid of failure. Hence, he purposefully ignores all the opportunities which summon the courage to speak. Therefore, the learner with this type of personality hardly finds any opportunity to speak in the target language and to practice its pronunciation. These various personality types lead to the various learning styles adopted by the learners.

2.11. Goals

Learners may learn English language with different purposes in their mind. Variation in purpose comes along with the variation in the goals of the learners. It is the goal of some learners to acquire native-like pronunciation, whereas the goal of other learners is to acquire comprehensible speaking skills. Learners who aim to acquire native-like pronunciation usually strive to have British or American pronunciation. Consequently, there is a great need to inform the learners that good pronunciation does not necessarily mean perfect American or British pronunciation. In fact, it means an intelligible pronunciation. A learner should set

up appropriate goals for learning pronunciation. His goal should not be to acquire perfect pronunciation but to have effective communication skills. Generally, good pronunciation relates to intelligibility and acceptability. Learners should keep in mind the intelligibility principle while setting up their goals for ESL classroom (Levis, [2005](#)).

2.12. External Factors (First Language Interference)

First language has different names like mother tongue, native language and primary language. It is common knowledge that first language interferes in acquiring the pronunciation of the second language. Many learners of the English language (L2) complain that it is difficult for them to understand the native speakers (Derakhshan & Karimi, [2015](#)). This is not because of the vocabulary and grammar of the English language; actually it is due to the pronunciation of the native speakers (Rivers, [1968](#)). Every language has a unique pronunciation system. When a learner opts to learn a second language, he knows that he has to learn another system of another language. He finds difficulties not only in learning the pronunciation but also in acquiring the vocabulary and grammar of that language due to the interference of the habits of his L1 (Beardsmore, [1982](#)). It was posited that if the phonological structure of the first language is different from the structure of the second language, then the learner will have problems in acquiring the pronunciation of the second language because of unfamiliar phonological rules of the second language (Fatemi, Sobhani & Abolhassan, [2012](#)). When a second language learner wants to write and speak in the target language, he seeks help from the structure of his first language. It is very difficult for him to take a start in the target language. If the structures of both languages are different, then there occur a lot of errors which make the learning process slow and difficult for the learner. This shows that the rules and structure of the first language influence the rules and structure of the second language (Bhela, [1999](#), p. 22). On the contrary, the acquisition of second language pronunciation can be easy and fun for a learner if there are similarities between the two languages. In this case, it is simpler for a learner to learn the pronunciation of the second language (L2).

2.13. Motivation

Motivation is also one of the most important factors which affect the pronunciation of second language and if it is used positively, it can yield favorable results (Dörnyei, [1998](#)). According to Shaaban, this element determines the success of developing skills in the second language or the foreign language (Shaaban, [2002](#)). Motivation can be defined as “a learner’s orientation with regards to goal of learning a second language” (Norris, [2005](#)). Empirical research shows that besides

motivation there are other factors such as self-confidence, intelligence and goals which play important roles in the formation of motivation (Meléndez, [2006](#)). Gardner and MacIntyre ([1991](#)) divided motivation into two types including instrumental motivation and integrated motivation. According to them, these two types of motivation can promote positive language learning inside the classroom (Gardner & MacIntyre, [1991](#)). Marinova, Marshall and Snow ([2000](#)) did a research on the adult acquisition of English and concluded that adults can become highly proficient, even native-like speakers of second languages, if they are motivated to do so (Marinova, Marshall & Snow, [2000](#)).

2.14. Role of Teacher

Pronunciation is a very complex component of language learning. It is imperative for a second language teacher to be at home in the phonetics and phonology of that particular second language. In terms of English language, it is essential for an English language teacher to have appropriate knowledge and information about its phonetics and phonology, so he may correct the pronunciation of language learners (Susmitha, [2014](#)). There are many tasks for the language teacher. Firstly, helping learners hear and produce sounds from Second language point of view. Secondly, distinguishing the features of sound on which attention should be paid. Thirdly, the selection of classroom activities according to different learning styles and aspects which influence the learning of pronunciation (Šebestová, [2007](#)). It is recommended to teachers that they should set their priorities according to the goals of the learners. The last but not the least important task is providing feedback and assessing learners' performance and progress. Moreover, feedback on learner's progress is an essential motivational factor in further acquisition of pronunciation.

2.15. Language Teaching Pedagogies

The history of language teaching, empirical researches and theoretical theories show that language teaching pedagogies shape the most favorable outcome. Correct use of English language pedagogy in the language classroom can help learners to improve their pronunciation. Longman Dictionary of applied linguistics defines pedagogy as "the study of the practices and procedures used in teaching, and the principles and beliefs that underlie them" (Richard & Schmidt, [2010](#), p. 363). The key to the selection of an effective way of teaching English language pronunciation is to understand and comprehend these pedagogies. Over the course of time, different language teaching methodologies have been introduced by educationists and language scholars. The right use of these methodologies in the right

environment in language classroom can facilitate the acquisition of English pronunciation.

2.16. Classroom Environment

Classroom environment can bring a big improvement in the pronunciation of English language in non-native English speaking countries. The way a learner perceives his proximal educational environment may shape the learning paths (Dörnyei, [2005](#)) along with the learning outcomes (Williams & Burden, [1997](#)). It has been observed that if an English language learner is not living in an English speaking country, he wouldn't be able to get suitable opportunities where he may speak English, except for the classroom environment. In that case, the learner wouldn't not be able to learn and improve his pronunciation based on real life situations and interactions. In such a scenario, the school must provide enough space, activities and exposure to substitute real life situations where a learner can learn by involving himself willingly (Szyszka, [2018](#)).

3. Methodology

It is a qualitative and descriptive research. The arguments and philosophical assumptions presented in this study are transparent and open for criticism and review by the reader. The researcher took help from primary source books, personal observations, empirical studies, and grounded theories as well as secondary source research articles, journals and reviews in completion of this research, which make this research precisely a library research. To ensure the validity and reliability of arguments and philosophical assumptions presented in this research, the researcher used the inductive approach.

4. Discussion and Suggestions

The purpose of this research is to describe all the internal and external factors which are extensively and marginally creating difficulties in the learning of the pronunciation of English language. All these factors were discussed in an inclusive manner in this article. These factors were discussed in a hierarchy according to the level of difficulties created by them in the learning of English pronunciation. In order to improve pronunciation, a leaner needs to analyze which factor is creating most difficulties for him. By finding an appropriate way to solve this problem, the learner can make clear progress and improve his pronunciation. Besides, teachers can also improve their teaching strategies and can teach pronunciation in the classroom more effectively and engagingly.

There are some useful suggestions for second language teachers to help learners improve their English pronunciation. English language teachers should be

accurately trained to teach pronunciation in order to improve their learners' pronunciation (Shahzada, 2012). English language teachers should speak clearly and slowly in their classes and they should convince their learners that their language is understandable. This can help their learners improve their pronunciation by listening to them carefully. Language teachers should instill this concept in the mind of the learners that comprehensibility is more important than fast speech (Kolokdaragh, 2010). ESL teachers should be aware of their learners' needs and problems while teaching pronunciation. Based on their needs, teachers should present some appropriate material to their learners to reduce their pronunciation problems (Shahzada, 2012). Schools should provide language labs to learners, where they can simulate real life situations and can have a better exposure of English language and its correct pronunciation. Teachers should use computer technologies in these language labs to help their learners improve their pronunciation by exposing them to authentic material (Kolokdaragh, 2010). Teachers should familiarize their learners to both American pronunciation and British pronunciation and learners should be able to understand both varieties of pronunciation (Kolokdaragh, 2010). Teachers should set obtainable goals that are appropriate keeping in view the communication needs of the learners. They should act as speech coach, give feedback to their learners, and encourage them to improve their pronunciation (Thanasoulas, 2002).

5. Conclusion

Teaching of pronunciation is the most difficult aspect of language teaching and the least favorite topic in the language classroom. It has been observed many times that this skill is totally ignored in the English language classroom. By understanding these factors both teachers and learners can improve themselves by putting their efforts in the right direction to get maximum results. The instruction of pronunciation is very important because pronunciation affects the understanding of the second language. If learners cannot utter the correct version of a word then they are unable to communicate properly. The instruction of pronunciation helps the learners to have a better understanding of native speakers and improves their ability to communicate easily and effectively.

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